PREPARED FOR THE BEST

January 13, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 62:1-4
Matthew 25:1-13

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise."
-Matthew 25:1 (NSRV)

Something like that always happens. You can count on it. I don't recall presiding at many weddings that did not include at least a minor mishap. Sometimes they are not so minor.

Robert Fulghum says that performing most weddings "is like joining two people trying to cross a mine field." Fulghum tells about marrying a Polish Jew from Brooklyn and a Detroit Irish Catholic, and all the attendant problems. "I note in passing," he wrote, "that weddings always tend to get a little out of hand. I've never seen one get smaller or stay on budget. One thing always leads to another. It's kind of like marriage itself. Or life. And why not? When it comes to joy and celebration, let it be expansive, always." [It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It, p. 135, 138]

Ministers soon learn that there is something about the event that invites mishap. Even those weddings which, from the perspective of the pew, appear to be going smoothly, probably aren't. It usually begins during rehearsal... the main purpose of which, I've always thought, is to allow tomorrow's mishaps to identify themselves. It's at the rehearsal that the best man telephones from Schaumburg to say he's lost, and the parents of the bride have rooms at the Hilton and decided to walk because they assumed we were just up the street, and then when they arrived tried all the wrong doors. Sometimes the license is forgotten, or the rings. Sometimes the flowers are undelivered, or the vows misspoken, the bride unkissed. It's marvelous! To those who undergo it, a wedding is one of the very important events in life, and in almost every case, one of the happiest.

So, isn't it remarkable that when Jesus was summing up, near the end of his own life, that he should choose a wedding as an analogy for the Kingdom of Heaven, a wedding with all its agony and ecstasy, all its grace and its mishaps?

According to the custom of the day, the guests assembled at the bride's home, on the evening of the wedding, and were entertained by her parents. They and the bridesmaids wait for the groom. He may in fact be concluding last minute contract negotiations. In any event, he sends messages every now and then to announce that he is indeed coming. Finally, accompanied by his friends, carrying torches, he arrives. The bride's guests light their torches and go out to greet him. And then, in a festive procession, in a flood of light, the entire party walks to the groom's home where his parents are waiting for the ceremony and the extended banquet which will follow and continue for several days. [J. Jeremas, Rediscovering the Parables, p. 137]

That's the setting. Ten bridesmaids are waiting for the groom. The wait is a long one and they fall asleep. Nothing wrong with that, by the way. What goes wrong is that when he arrives and everybody wakes up, five of the young women don't have enough oil to fuel their torches. The other five don't have enough to share. So while the wonderful torchlight procession is happening, these five are out, frantically scouring the town for lamp oil. And when they finally find some and buy it and return, it's too late. They missed the event.

And it is easy to miss the point of this little story. It would seem at first to be a warning against falling asleep. But that's not it. The point here is being wise - shrewd enough to be prepared for the very best that can happen.

The early Christian Church loved this little story about the bridegroom arriving late. The reason is that the early Christians had to get used to the idea that the return of Jesus, which they fully expected, had not happened. It was beginning to dawn on them that maybe it wasn't going to happen, or that whatever Jesus meant about returning to be with them, it wasn't going to be a descent from the clouds, surrounded by angels, at the end of the world. Maybe he would come in a different way, and maybe their task, instead of withdrawing from the world, selling all their goods and waiting for the imminent end, maybe their task was to be faithful in life, to continue the daily tasks of life, watchful for his coming which will happen in surprising, unexpected, but commonplace ways. And maybe they reasoned, if you are obsessed with the final, cataclysmic end of the world, the victorious second coming as some Christians always have been, maybe you might miss the first coming.

It's exactly what happened, when you think about it in the aftermath of Christmas. Christians celebrate the coming of a Christ nobody expected and very few recognized. The religious hopes of the people in Bethlehem and Jerusalem and Galilee at the time focused elsewhere on a political leader who would restore the monarchy of David and some of those who waited for the Messiah hoped he would be a guerrilla leader who would take advantage of the patriotism of the Jewish people and their deep longing for freedom and independence and organize a revolution. It is clearly what some expected Jesus to do later. It may have been Judas' bitterest disappointment.

Others probably expected a learned and brilliant rabbi or a new High Priest. No one expected a carpenter from Nazareth, and no one expected a

Messiah to say and do the things Jesus of Nazareth said and did. Like the foolish bridesmaids in the story, his contemporaries were fooling around with the paraphernalia of "Messiah waiting" and missed him.

What does it mean to wait? What does it mean - for us - to be watchful, ready, prepared for his coming?

It means, first of all, knowing that the bridegroom is coming; it means that absolute certainty, even though none of us is able to articulate it simply and clearly, that the final issues are resolved. It means living with a strong sense of hope and expectation.

Christian faith maintains that history is not a meaningless drifting in eternity, but a process which has a goal, a purpose, and that it will be fulfilled. We have not been at our best when we have claimed to know when and how that fulfillment will occur. In fact, using the obscure hints in Scripture, we have been at our silliest when some of us calculated the day and the hour, sold all earthly goods and waited for the end or were so intent on the return of the Lord that the concerns of the world were regarded as unimportant. That's not the point. Christian hope is based on the trust that the God who created the world will continue to love the world and with gentle but firm providence continue to guide the world and the human story to its fulfillment.

Christian hope is as big as the whole story of humankind and as small as every individual. Ultimate issues about ourselves have been resolved in Christ, we believe. At baptism we are trying to affirm it. These little ones are safe in God's love forever. Their end - like their beginning - will be in God.

In the meantime, the journey may be difficult and dangerous and frightening. Living in hope does not mean we are immune from the difficulties of history. The early Christians heard this story on the eve of a period of fierce persecution and we are hearing it this morning in a time of enormous uncertainty and fear and dread.

And God's word to us, as it has come to countless millions before us, at moments of historic uncertainty and tragedy and war, is that it is also a time of hope, because God is the Lord of history; and that while the days ahead may be difficult they are ultimately part of a process which leads to God. Bringing it into a kind of radical personal focus it means that everyone - everyone of those young men and women, American, British, Saudi, Iraqi - everyone of them is a precious and beloved child of God and none will ever be separated from God's love.

To live in hope is to know that whatever occurs in the days ahead, there is always the possibility of peace - precisely because we trust one who promises to come in unexpected and unanticipated ways; that however dark the night becomes, the light shines on the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

A world without hope is a very dangerous place. A world in which all accommodate to the inevitability of war will ultimately be a very violent place. So we who believe God's revelation in Jesus Christ and trust it to

be true are called to be hopeful, to hold on to hope with tenacity, even when everyone else has given up and the negotiations are over and the troops amassed, or even when men and women are killing each other and the bombs are falling. To believe God's revelation in Jesus Christ and to trust it may mean, for some, going to war with both a sense of profound sadness, but also confidence that the bridegroom comes and that there is always hope.

To live in hope is to expect more from political leadership. In preparing for this sermon I was studying a little commentary on the Parables written a generation ago by George Arthur Buttrick. Writing about this parable he said that the nations were well prepared for war in 1914, but no one was prepared for peace in 1918. We were not prepared for the best. And so the worst happened and the World War resumed two decades later. Our political leaders spent two trillion dollars in the 1980s on the weapons and systems of war-making. At the same time, the infra-structure of the nation crumbled. The poor got poorer, the rich got richer, the health care system collapsed at the lower end of the economic scale, the education system sagged, and city streets filled up with homeless people with no place to live. We disregarded international law, made fun of the World Court and refused to pay our United Nation dues. To be prepared for the best, i.e. to live in hope, is to expect more from leadership than that. It is to expect at least equal effort invested in working for the international justice which is necessary for peace as we are always more than willing to invest in arming the world.

To live in hope is to expect a commitment to structures of international law and a renewed and consistent commitment to the World Court and the United Nations, not only when it is convenient to us.

To live in hope is to be faithful now, to choose a vigorous and demanding life, deeply involved in the world and the difficult issues which will determine the lives of our children and their children. To live in hope is to know that there is always light in the darkness.

The bridesmaids were waiting. And so are we all. The experience of waiting is universal. Children wait to be old enough to go to school, to ride a bicycle, to stay out late, to drive a car. Students wait for graduation, for a job and for real life to begin. Young adults wait for promotions and raises and the full acceptance of the adult world.

We wait for fulfillment, for happiness, contentment. The theological word for it is salvation. To be human and alive is to wait.

The word of faith is that salvation comes in the love of a God who came in the birth of a baby. The word of faith is a challenge to live expectantly, always prepared for the best precisely because we know our God comes to us in surprising, unexpected and commonplace ways, as we live and work and love and hope.

Ranier Maria Rilke wrote a series of letters to a young military officer who wished to be a poet. In one of them he responds to the young man's lament that he has lost his belief in God.

The older poet wrote at Christmas time, 1903, in a way that beautifully captures the essence of this hope:

> "Why don't you think of him as the one who is coming, who has been approaching from all eternity?... What keeps you from projecting his birth into the ages that are coming into existence, and living your life as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy?" [Letters to a Young Poet, p. 61]

So in Jesus Christ God comes among us and heaven breaks into earth when we are prepared to greet him.

Jesus Christ comes when Christian people live in hope and will not give it up.

Jesus Christ comes when faithful disciples express love and compassion and work for justice.

Christ comes in individual acts of courage, and caring and peacemaking.

Jesus Christ comes when people who are lonely and isolated know that they are held in the strong arms of love.

Jesus Christ comes when critically ill patients understand finally that they are safe in God's love.

Jesus Christ comes when men and woman live difficult, dangerous days, like these days, in the quiet confidence of those who know that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love: Heaven breaks into earth when faithful men and women live in hope and are prepared for the best.

Amen.

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Come into our world, O God, with your peace.
Come to your church, with your call to faithful witness.
Come to us, with your hope in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.